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Sermon

The Gospel of the Kingdom

Matthew 10:24-39; Jeremiah 20:7-13

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I don't know about you but I found that a difficult gospel reading! How do we relate to it? As I considered it, I realised that we needed to see it in its context; to step back and see the wider picture. What is the situation Jesus was addressing?

This is chapter 10, when Jesus sent the twelve out on their own ministry trips. He gives them instructions. He sends them to preach the gospel of the kingdom. That is an important theme in his ministry so what does it mean? Is it the same as the gospel of salvation?

Salvation is just the start – not the whole message. It is about bringing spiritually dead people to life, bringing them into good relationship with God washed clean from sin and giving them the hope of a glorious life to come.

The Romans passage assures us of God's dealing with the very real barriers between us and him. When we repent and turn to Christ, the old life dies. Baptism is a picture then of burying the corpse – the body goes down into the water - then the person rises again to new life in Christ.

The life we now live is his life and so starts to change our behaviour. Think of the Sermon on the Mount. Does that seem like a list of challenging things to achieve to be accepted? If so, we've missed the point.

Listen to what Dallas Willard, a respected professor of theology and philosophy said on this very point:

I believe that the greatest gift of Jesus, outside the gift of himself and 'regeneration' is the Sermon on the Mount. But the way most interpret it actually makes it sound like bad news. This extends for example to the Beatitudes. People read: 'Blessed are the Poor' and say, 'oh I've got to become poor in order to be blessed'. This is a total misunderstanding of his teaching. All of his teaching is about the kingdom of God, entering the kingdom of God

through faith in him and the process of being transformed so that the kinds of behaviour taught, and indeed the old law, are a natural expression of who we have become.¹

Salvation is about getting us established in Christ. But God has more than that in mind. He has a work for us to do with the Holy Spirit as he extends his rule on earth.

That rule of God was the major point of Jesus' teaching and miracles. Why does he need to proclaim it?

The ordinary Jews of the first century had developed the idea that God was far away and disinterested in their lives and concerns. Prayer could be very impersonal and by rote. Often it was an attempt to keep a difficult God safely contained or to wrest benefits from a reluctant God. All other peoples in the world believed similar ideas. And that is still the case.

Jesus proclaimed that God's rule was coming; it was near. God is not disinterested and distant – he is right alongside. For those of us who have committed ourselves to him as Saviour, he comes to dwell within us, we feed on him in the communion – how much closer can he get?

To dive into today's gospel for a moment, Jesus gives the example of God knowing when a sparrow falls to the ground. If a sparrow holds his attention, is he not interested in you?! He knows how many hairs there are on your head – easier perhaps in my case than for many of you – does he not care then for the important things of my life – and yours?

God is not distant but immediate, imminent, intimate while at the same time being awesome, immense and majestic.

Jesus teaches us to pray for God's will to be done and God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven. Should we regard that as all a future state? I don't think so. We ask for and invite his will to be done right now. We seek his rule in all the affairs of life now although it will not come in fullness until Jesus returns.

What then opposes God's rule? An obvious answer is the rebellion of mankind and that is so. But there is another opposition which is also important and that is spiritual. How significant is it? Well Jesus refers to Satan as the prince of this world.² Paul called him the ruler of the kingdom of the air.³

Here kingdoms collide. The gospel of the Kingdom acknowledges that the enemy has gained control of most of the world's system. Jesus calls people to come under God's rule instead and makes it possible. Paul writes in Colossians 1 that he prays that they give thanks to the Father, "who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation."⁴

When you have fundamentally opposed rulers brought into contact, they will clash and the result is war. When Jesus went about delivering people from the power of unclean spirits – it was war. When he healed the sick, it was war – he was setting people free from all the negativity and destruction of the enemy. Peter states this in Acts 10:38, "... God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil..."

¹ Quoted from <http://www.dwillard.org/articles/artview.asp?artID=92>

² John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11

³ Ephesians 2:2

⁴ Colossians 1:12-15

Then Jesus commissioned the twelve apostles to go out and do the same. That is at the beginning of Matthew 10, the chapter from which we read.

10:1 “He gave them authority to drive out evil spirits and to heal every disease and sickness.”

10:7-8 “...as you go, preach this message: ‘The Kingdom of Heaven is near,’ Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons.”

Some of us work to extend the kingdom. We want everyone to know that God is available and he is good. We want them to know that they can know him as Father. We want to extend his kingdom in hearts and over physical situations like healing. We often are not very good at it. A bit like the British Expeditionary Force at the beginning of WW2. They were too few, poorly trained and equipped and they had the wrong strategy. Hitler sailed past them and they had to be evacuated with great losses.

I don’t mean that God has not equipped us – he has. But we have limited understanding, limited confidence and our soldiers are liable either to fire on each other or refuse to believe there is a war anyway!

Jesus commissioned his apostle to go out and to preach ‘the Kingdom of heaven is near AND to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and drive out demons.’ These were instructions for their immediate mission. He then gave broader mission instructions for later missions. By then opposition would increase and they might be arrested, punished and even killed because of their message. It is out of these instructions that today’s reading comes.

When we are doing as the early disciples did: actively telling people that they can be free of the oppression they know and come under God’s gracious rule, when we too are demonstrating the power of God to bring spiritual and physical freedom and well-being, then we may well find opposition stirs against us because we will be a threat to that other kingdom – a kingdom which is already defeated but is not yet destroyed.

I am reminded of the experience of John Wesley founder of Methodism. As he rode through England preaching the gospel he was vigorously resisted at times. Let me quote from the book, *Crossing the Divide: John Wesley, the Fearless Evangelist* by Jake Hanson⁵:

“The angry mobs could often be vicious, chasing Wesley and his companions with clubs, cleavers, or any other potentially deadly instrument at hand. He was often pelted with stones, smeared with dirt, grabbed by his ‘soft hair’—as one of the rabble once noted in surprise—and chased into houses, which they threatened to burn or tear down.”

In Wesley’s first church in Bristol, “The New Room”, the pulpit was built with access only from the first floor, so the preacher could not be reached by an angry congregation but could escape out the back of the building if a riot broke out.

When opposition comes, Jesus told them and us not to be afraid. He gives three reasons for this:

1. Because the truth will come out. Eventually the false opposition will be discredited.
2. Because ultimate security is guaranteed. Jesus says your opponents may be able to kill you but they can’t take eternal life away from you. So the one to respect and obey is the one with eternal power of life and death - that is God.
3. Because Father God is intimately aware of our situation. If he knows when a sparrow falls to the ground, if he numbers the hairs on your head, he certainly knows the details of life which you face.

⁵ Hanson Jake, 2016, *Crossing the Divide: John Wesley, the Fearless Evangelist*, Barbour Publishing Inc, Uhrichsville, Ohio

Jeremiah is an example of this. He was commissioned by God to give warnings of judgement to Judah. It was not a pleasant message for the prophet or for the hearers. Jeremiah has just been beaten and held in the stocks overnight as a deterrent from prophesying against the city.

So he complains to God about his situation: Perhaps he thinks back to his commissioning in chapter 1. He was young and reluctant, but God called him to be a prophet telling him that judgment would come on Jerusalem and he was to proclaim it but he was assured of God's protection.

Jeremiah 1:19 "They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the LORD."

Perhaps Jeremiah felt God had not kept his promise since he had been punished for prophesying. Yet his strength was that he acknowledged persecution but refused to focus on and be dragged down by his feelings. He committed his way to the Lord, trusted in him and expected God to act.⁶ He started to praise God in the midst of his situation.

This did not happen by accident. He had deliberately chosen to feed on God's word before trouble came and when it hit, he was prepared.

In the gospel passage from verse 34, Jesus talks about not bringing peace but a sword – not a literal sword (he rebuked those who brought out swords at Gethsemane). This is a metaphor for division. Either you follow Jesus or you don't. The divide goes through families. In Jesus' own case, his mother and brothers tried to stop him in his mission before they came to believe in him⁷.

This division between people, even close relatives, is inevitable as some have accepted the offer of eternal life and been translated into the kingdom of light while others remain in the dominion of darkness.

In saying we must not deny him and that we will suffer with division in our families, Jesus is calling for our loyalty, just as any earthly king would do. If we are truly committed to him, the fact that a family member does not agree will not be enough to dissuade us.

I am often amazed at the faulty thinking of people when a family member does something wrong or immoral. The fact the person is family does not make everything he or she does right. What is right or wrong remains true and we love someone who has chosen otherwise. That does not mean we change the rules to accommodate the person. We can love someone and disagree with them. We can love someone and desire the best for them which would be return to God's ways.

To us all – myself included – I give Jesus' call: The Kingdom of God is near; repent and believe! And again, the Kingdom of God is near, preach the gospel, heal the sick, raise the dead, cast our demons!

All scriptural quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible: New International Version* ©1972, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Societies. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

⁶ Prov 3:5&6; Ps 37:5&6

⁷ Mk 3:21

